DEATHS IN LIFE

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AT FIRST SIGHT IT LOOKED LIKE ANY other luncheon party. The day was warm enough for it to be held outdoors and dozens of friends of the host couple were eating and drinking, talking and laughing. What was not so obvious was that they had gathered to help say farewell to a house and a garden in which their hosts had lived for nearly thirty years, raised their children, consolidated their careers, worked through the highs and lows of their marriage. The impending move was both timely and desirable and there was much to be said in its favour. Leaving the old house, however, was a wrench which they both felt. Some sort of recognition seemed desirable, both in celebration of what had been and in acknowledgement of what would not be in the same way again. The couple had decided that the appropriate rite was a garden party with friends old and new who had shared something of the significance of their living in that house and playing in that garden.

This couple recognized their need of help in making an important transition. They found a rite which worked for them and in which significant others could share without embarrassment. And they found that their participation in the rite really did make it easier for them to cope with a major change in their lives which, though positive in many ways, nevertheless involved genuine grief at what was lost in the process. These impending losses were not unimportant. They included a loss of neighbours who had become friends, a loss of familiar patterns of living, a loss of things and of spaces which could evoke powerful memories, a loss of identity in the local community and many other losses which they could not identify so clearly.

This couple was lucky. Many of us are expected to deal with very significant losses in our own lives without the support of recognized and accepted rituals and, all too often, without any clear sense of social support. Our losses are frequently not only a source of hurt and pain to us but are also an embarrassment to our friends, to our various social communities and, critically, to our faith communities. There are some losses we are allowed to grieve and for which we are given ritual support but there are many others in which that support is denied us and all too often we are deprived even of the comfort of knowing that they are recognized as painful. In spite of all ambiguity and ambivalence in our

culture and in our churches about death, western society still acknowledges that some form of ritual response to death and to bereavement is called for in respect both to the survivors and to the deceased. But we do not typically extend this acknowledgement to what can be the even more confused and painful experience of divorce. Divorce involves many of the same losses as death, including the loss of relationships, the loss of status and perhaps the loss of financial and social security – and may well involve even more loss of self-esteem – and all of these further complicated by the fact that the lost other is still there, but not there for us. Why a rite for some transitional experiences but not for others? What makes the death of a relationship so much harder for the Church to deal with – and to assist others to deal with – than the death of an individual person?

Traditionally the Church has claimed that it has been pastorally faithful and liturgically creative in ritualizing the more important transitions. Birth, puberty, the attainment of full sexual capacity, parenthood and death are all life transitions which involve loss as well as gain and they have each given rise to sacramental recognition in the Church and to a whole variety of other recognitions in secular society and its various cultures and sub-cultures. The rites of passage abound. When we look closer, however, we find that the readily available and widely accepted rites tend to be restricted to those transitions which are either socially approved (such as marriage) or those which are recognized as inevitable in the ordinary course of events (such as puberty and death). Those transitions which are more ambiguous in terms of their social acceptability (such as those associated with the breakdown of marriage, for example) are much less likely to be ritualized. Similarly, those transitions which involve the frustration of social ideals (such as the move from the status of student to that of unemployed person or from employment to retrenchment or redundancy, or even retirement) are rarely given ritual expression. Nor has the Church found it easy to mark those transitions which seem to represent a turning away from an earlier vision (such as the loss of a religious vocation or of a form of apostolate). Each of these transitions is increasingly common in the community in general and church members are in no sense exempt from them and yet there has been very little systematic and disciplined effort to address the need for ritualization.

Even within the well-accepted rites and ritual acts there is a tendency to minimize (or sometimes completely overlook) elements within the transition that create social discomfort. The element of grief associated with loss (and especially the deep feelings aroused in the process of grieving) is one such discomforting feature for much of our contempor-

ary western society. Even funeral liturgies can be so anxious to 'celebrate the resurrection' that they are hardly adequate in coming to terms with the hurt and the pain we experience in our loss of our relationship with the one who has died. To take a rather different example, when we look at the liturgies available to celebrate weddings we commonly find little, if any, recognition of, or attempt to come to terms with, the significant losses experienced by a couple coming from the single into the married state. In my experience in community education about grief over the last three decades, very few people have difficulty in identifying significant losses in both the promise and the reality of marriage. The response most often given to the simple question, 'What do you lose when you get married?' has been 'freedom' – and subsequent discussion makes it apparent that this is not simply cynicism but is a genuine awareness that the demands of marriage inevitably curtail a wide range of freedoms, many of which have been significant in our own previous understanding of ourselves. Marriage inevitably involves a redefinition of our own identity and this requires the putting aside of that identity which has been ours up to this point. For women this is most strikingly illustrated by the still common expectation that they will give up their family name upon marriage and take the name of another. In a society which sees marriage in basically positive terms, it is entirely appropriate that the dominant emphasis in a wedding liturgy be on the anticipated and hoped-for gains – but unless there is somewhere a balancing awareness that it is not all gain and unless the grief for the genuine losses involved is recognized and dealt with, the likelihood of those gains being realized is critically diminished.

It is my thesis that the attempt to create a satisfactory liturgy for any significant transition demands clarity both with respect to what the transition is from and also with respect to the new status into which the person is being introduced. The transitions with which we are concerned here lack that clarity with respect to the new status. The Church has no clear understanding of what it means to be a divorced person and what privileges and deprivations go with that status. Nor has it any clarity about the status of the unemployed in a community which tends to give and withhold value to persons on the basis of the work which they do. There is similar ambiguity experienced with regard to religious congregations and other faith communities trying to cope with changed perceptions of their task and their role – there is no clarity about the status into which they are being called. As Gerald Arbuckle wisely comments in his exploration of the grief of apostolic communities, 'the letting go of the familiar and secure past and present is the severest test of

nerve and vision, for institutions as much as for individuals'.[1] In the absence of this clarity there are real limitations on the style of rites that can be appropriately used and on the effectiveness of ritualization.

I would like to explore this thesis by looking at the recent report of a service of holy communion which was adapted as a 'ritual for the ending of a marriage' by an Australian Anglican, Cecilia Francis.[2] It is worth noting, by way of introduction, that the very attempt to create such liturgies is a comparatively modern phenomenon although divorce and the debate about the appropriateness of remarriage following divorce is hardly new. Does this mean that it is only in our time that pastoral sensitivity has been awakened or does it mean that our pastoral sensitivity to the divorced is somehow misplaced in a search for appropriate rites? William Willimon seems almost to suggest the latter when he devotes a single (but scathing) footnote to the question in his *Worship as pastoral care.* He is discussing the experimental rituals relating to the divorced published by one of the mainline American churches in the mid-seventies under the title *Ritual in a new day* and he comments that these 'so-called rituals'

> show the problem of conceiving of worship as primarily a therapeutic attempt to meet the needs of people. The result is a questionable accommodation to the values of the culture that may only accentuate people's needs rather than bring the church's resources to bear in ministering to these needs.[3]

The critical word in this quotation is 'primarily' and Willimon may well be right in suggesting that the particular rituals to which he draws attention fall down at the point of being more concerned with a particular understanding of human need than they are with divine worship. He would, I believe, agree that it may well be the very 'needs of people' which provide us with the appropriate stimulus to worship and which help shape the form of that worship. His own discussion of both weddings and funerals suggest that he is well aware of the important role that the rituals can in fact play in meeting a wide variety of human needs but he wants to insist that when we are looking at the rites appropriately offered by the Church

> the primary reason for our congregating to worship is not to focus upon ourselves and our desires but to focus upon God and God's relationship to us. The centrality of the funeral within the grief process, at least for the church, is not that a funeral is a good therapeutic aid to psychological well-being (which it often is) but that a funeral is an excellent time to

> focus upon God and our life and death in the light of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.[4]

This is an important controlling principle in the construction of any liturgy but it does not really tell us why a rite cannot be devised to recognize the death of a marriage. Does not this death also constitute 'an excellent time to focus upon God and our life and death [including all our little deaths] in the light of God's love for us in Jesus Christ'?

Cecilia Francis deliberately uses the form of the Anglican service of Holy Communion and seeks to make that form relevant to the experience of the ending of a marriage by revising and particularizing the content of the Confession and Absolution and of the Prayer of Intercession. Hymns, readings and homily addressed the specific situation in their own ways as at any other eucharist being celebrated on a particular occasion and care was taken with the choice of symbolic objects such as a crystal goblet as a chalice 'to represent the presence together of visibility, fragility and strength'. Other changes to the liturgy are modest and largely in the interests of inclusive language. In this way she maintains a proper focus upon God and our relationship to God as sought by Willimon. In her discussion Francis sharpens this focus in a very fascinating way. She speaks of the 'three minute legal declaration' of the ending of her marriage and of the extended process of dialogue with her parish priest in which they sought together 'to create a liturgy that would express for me, before God and others, a desire for integrity in life's reality and faith'. She then goes on to say that, for her, liturgy

> offered a space, before God, in which to confirm the reality of brokenness, to draw together resources, be part of the body of Christ that knew of crucifixion and resurrection, take responsibility for where I stood and ask others to join me there – for support, affirmation and to confirm my identity again. It became a proclamation of death and of hope.[5]

This comment serves to underline the peculiar appropriateness of using the eucharistic services as a vehicle for 'confirming the reality of brokenness' and doing something creative about it. The Christian eucharist is pre-eminently an act of the Christian community which enables each of us in our uniqueness and in our belonging within the community to offer our full reality to God. God receives from both the community and the individual worshipper our weakness as well as our strength, the evil that is within us as well as the good; the destructiveness which characterizes us as well as our creativity; the failures we have and

the failures we are as well as those things that have made life good for us and for others. God receives our hate and our pain and our hurt as well as our love and our joy and our peace and in the mysterious processes of God's love and holiness these things become transmuted and we are given a glimpse of the reality of our own newness.

We have considerably more difficulties, however, when we ask what function this rite is seeking to perform. The major pastoral rites tend to assume that it is important to specify the function quite unambiguously if the necessary transition is to be made in a clear and satisfactory manner. Rites of weddings, therefore, declare an intention to 'join this man and this woman . . .'. They affirm particular beliefs about marriage and they seek particular blessings on the couple and on the families involved. Similarly the funeral rites explicitly acknowledge both the particular death and death in general; affirm Christian belief about death in the light of Christ's death and seek divine help to ensure the ongoing well-being both of the dead (explicitly or implicitly) and of the survivors. It is worth noting that funeral rites in the contemporary Church are, for the most part, much more satisfactory in relation to the well-being of survivors than of the deceased – we are rather clearer about the status of widowhood than we are about the status of the dead. What is it that a rite for those experiencing the ending of a marriage seeks to do? Francis' liturgy is ambiguous at this point. It is somewhat clearer about what the transition is *from* than it is about what it is *to*. The title of the service does specify that it is a service of holy communion 'for those experiencing the ending of a marriage'. However, nothing in the formal content of the service forthrightly acknowledges the marriage which has been, the social reality of separation and of '*un*joining this man and this woman . . .', the present status of vows taken at the earlier ceremony or, particularly, the new reality into which the rite discharges the formerly married couple. These things are in the background of Francis' actual liturgy however much they may be in the forefront of the minds of the persons for whom the liturgy is being celebrated.

The closest that Francis comes to specifying the function of this liturgy is in the Confession and the Absolution. The Confession is a peculiarly sensitive expression of 'the reality of brokenness' which permits rather than requires the context of the ending of a marriage. As is later noted in the Prayer of Intercession, the service could be equally valid for 'all who grieve a loss' and there is a realistic awareness that loss takes many forms and the losses which are often hardest to come to terms with are those in which we lose a sense of our own value as human beings. The Confession manages to avoid apportioning blame while not abdicating

from a sense of responsibility. It faces the reality and the pain of failure without being too judgemental. It could not be used in every circumstance of marriage breakdown or of other major loss but it does have much to offer as a model from which adaptations could be made. The prayer is offered by the priest, that is, by the representative of the faith community:

> As we prepare to celebrate the mystery of Christ's love, let us confess our sins and ask God for pardon and strength.
>
> Loving God, there are times in our lives when we face an ending which seems to us like a death – a death of hope for a relationship; a death of what we saw as our future; a death of an image we had of ourselves as people who would always honour the commitment we made before you to other people.
>
> O God, we wonder where you were in all of that, and whether we were wrong in our beginnings, or wrong at our endings.
>
> We came into your presence believing that we have faced things that were too great for us, and knowing that you never ask us to be destroyed.
>
> We come before you the Christ who has entered all the painful experiences of our life – and confess that, in the complexities of human relationship, we fail.
>
> The failure has the power to wound us and those we love; to shake our faith in our own worth and beauty, and in the great possibilities of human relationship.
>
> In the depths of our hearts we are afraid of our frailty and our aloneness.
>
> We need your healing and your recreating, your power to restore to us the hope of the fullness of life.
>
> We need your forgiveness, and in the silence we make our confession to you.

The Absolution follows and is personalized by the laying on of hands. This is rather less satisfactory than the Confession and precisely because in seeking to avoid being too specific it becomes too global in its claims. To be declared 'free forever from all that has gone before' does not take the historical reality of the human condition with sufficient seriousness and therefore does not help us to pick up those things for which we are genuinely now free. The full text of the Absolution is as follows:

> To God, our endings can be the sign of new beginnings; our deaths are the prelude to resurrection.
>
> God cannot save us from the consequences of what we do, but there is no condemnation.
>
> Receive the gift of new life and the sign that, even at this moment, you are one with Christ, who will never leave you nor forsake you, to the end of time.

Go in peace, free forever from all that has gone before.
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

What is being avoided here is the issue which is at the heart of the dilemma: what does divorce free us to be and to do – and conversely, what does it not free us to be and to do? Marriage is critically about our sexuality and the freedoms and limitations on its expression. When a marriage ends in separation or, more especially, in divorce, what happens to those freedoms and those limitations? The churches differ a great deal in their capacity to articulate a coherent understanding of marriage and divorce which would allow these issues to be addressed more directly and with less embarrassment.

What Francis has offered us is a rite which can address part of the situation. It can address the brokenness and it can affirm the value of persons in the midst of ambiguity. But it necessarily leaves us in ambiguity because the Church as a whole (and not just those churches who have particular difficulties with questions of the remarriage of divorced persons) has followed the community in showing little inclination really to come to terms with the deeper issues of human sexuality. Pastoral clarity cannot come out of theological confusion and obscurity. Francis testifies that she found participation in the ritual a liberating and confirming experience but that such a process had not been possible for some of her friends after divorce. One suspects that Francis was fortunate enough to have the personal capacity to go beyond what the Church could affirm and define her own new status with some reasonable clarity.

The ambiguities in relation to the rites and rituals which may be appropriate for the separations and losses involved in unemployment (be it through retrenchment, redundancy, retirement, or the inability to find a job), are multiplied by a distorted and indeed idolatrous attitude to work prevalent in our community. And the Church must accept some responsibility for this distortion even as it seeks to relieve the distress of those who suffer. We have so exalted the value of work, and so equated 'work' with paid employment, that when circumstances dictate that people cannot find or retain a job, it is not surprising that they commonly experience themselves as failures (in a total sense) who have been deprived of significant value and meaning for their lives. There is a deep and often cynical gap between political rhetoric about full employment and technological reality which increasingly reduces the spheres for meaningful human labour. The Church appears to give a double message when it fails to notice this gap and continues to promote distorted values of work while at the same time seeking to have people

believe that their value and their significance are not given in what they do so much as in who they are. This is to say that it is unlikely that the churches can offer realistic rituals for retirement, say, and especially for 'early retirement', until they have seriously addressed the question of what it is that they are inviting the retired to be and to become. Even less can they expect to be able to create appropriate liturgies to help people cope with redundancy and retrenchment, or the inability to find a job, until they have come to terms with the place of work in human life since most potential workers would like to believe that their unemployment is a temporary phenomenon. Francis' work on the ending of a marriage does raise the possibility, however, that a careful adaptation of the service of holy communion may be of considerable help in dealing with the frustrations brought about by those life circumstances which require us to re-think the values we have absorbed along the way. The great danger is that we might actually add to the problems with which the unemployed have to deal by any suggestion that they are peculiarly sinful and in need of special absolution!

In this discussion the focus has been on major rites and this is appropriate for major transitions. But there are many other and less formal ways in which the Church can acknowledge the anguish of grieving human beings, whatever the nature of their loss. Perhaps the most fundamental, and the most powerful, is simply to listen to the other, to listen with all our heart, our soul, our mind, our strength. There is no more creative way of loving than to listen, to listen until we hear the pain and the despair, the guilt and the loneliness, to keep on listening even when we cannot hear any hope or joy or anything else that might lighten our discomfort, to listen in the sure knowledge that the self-giving which is listening carries its own good news. To listen is not easy but sometimes it is enough to bring healing to someone else's brokenness. Often we need more than just listening but we can be very sure that whatever rites or rituals we may perform, whatever prayers we may share or whatever passages of scripture we may read, we have nothing to offer the other if we have not first listened.

NOTES

[1] Gerald Arbuckle, *Grieving for change: a spirituality for refounding gospel communities* (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1991), p 137.

[2] Cecilia Francis, 'A ritual for the ending of a marriage' in *Ministry, Society and Theology*, Vol 6 no 1 (June 1992), pp 16–24.

[3] William H. Willimon, *Worship as pastoral care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p 225; *Ritual in a new day* was also published by Abingdon, 1976.

[4] Willimon, *op. cit.*, p 115. [5] Francis, *op. cit.*, p 17.